



Published on *East-West Center* / www.eastwestcenter.org (<https://www.eastwestcenter.org>)

[Home](#) > What To Do About 'Fake News'

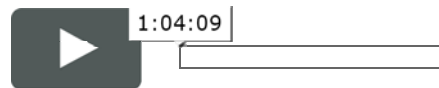
What To Do About 'Fake News'

The East-West Wire is a news, commentary, and analysis service provided by the East-West Center in Honolulu. Any part or all of the Wire content may be used by media with attribution to the East-West Center or the person quoted. To receive the East-West Center Wire articles via email, subscribe [here](#). For links to all East-West Center media programs, fellowships and services, see www.eastwestcenter.org/journalists.

SINGAPORE (June 27, 2018)—Everybody worries about the “fake news” phenomenon, but what can actually be done about it? A panel representing public policymakers, traditional media, tech companies, and academia examined options for combating such disinformation at this week’s East-West Center [International Media Conference](#) in Singapore. The conference is being co-hosted by EWC, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and Singapore Management University.

Professor Cherian George of the Department of Journalism at Hong Kong Baptist University began the discussion by emphasizing that the very concept of “fake news” can be extremely dangerous if the public becomes cynical about all news sources or even about the reliability of information and reason in general. Singapore Straits Times Editor Warren Fernandez

observed that a key aspect of the definition of “fake news” is the intention to spread misinformation. It must be clearly distinguished from comedy, satire, analysis, opinion, and commentary, he said.



Dr. Janil Puthuchear, Senior Minister of State for Singapore’s Ministry of Transport and Ministry of Communications and Information added that all stakeholders bear a personal responsibility for the dissemination of truthful information, including governments, academics, the traditional press, social platforms, and private citizens. Since a great deal of

“fake news” is disseminated on social platforms, Facebook’s head of public policy in Southeast Asia, Alvin Tan, described how the social media giant is trying to reduce intentional misinformation by closing bogus accounts, blocking obvious offensive content such as pornography and terrorism, and expanding third-party fact-checking. Facebook also needs to educate users to identify false accounts and disinformation themselves, he said, and to make better use of the filters that the software provides.



Panel moderator Torben Stephan, director of Konrad Adenauer Stiftung’s Media Programme Asia, asked whether it would be possible to implement international standards for news content rather than asking providers such as Facebook to follow separate standards in more than 200 countries around the world. Minister Puthucheariy responded that each country has its own inflammatory issues, values, and standards of propriety, and it would be

impossible to dictate a single definition of inappropriate content for the entire world. For example, he said, Germany has a law against media content that denies the holocaust, but other countries do not.

Puthucheariy stressed that Facebook and other social media platforms have the technical capacity to identify and delete inappropriate content on a country-by-country basis, and Tan responded that Facebook is currently dedicating considerable resources to this issue. Prof. George countered that Facebook appears to be paying attention to fact-checking and blocking disinformation in lucrative markets such as Germany, but what about smaller markets like Myanmar? Tan stressed that Facebook is getting to know the needs of each national market better by investing in additional staff.

Puthucheariy is a member of the Singapore government’s Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods, which is currently preparing a report that will provide the basis for new legislation designed to control the dissemination of “fake news” in Singapore. However, George said that government action might not be the best approach, because governments are often the chief culprits. Legislation to control “fake news” in other Asian countries appears to be targeting critics of the government, he said.

Puthucheariy responded that the Singapore government is approaching the issue cautiously, seeking wide input over more than a year. The goal is to tailor a narrowly focused law, he said, with proportionate penalties that will address only the most egregious cases and increase the space for legitimate discourse, including satire and divergent opinions.

The panel members agreed that the ultimate



defense against “fake news” is a public with skeptical, inquiring minds. With this aim, The Straits Times has initiated a service to provide schoolteachers with news content that will provoke classroom discussion, Fernandez said. Puthucheary added that the Singapore government has recently rolled out a new school curriculum to “help students engage with contemporary issues using the news of the day as the substrate for developing skills of media literacy and critical thinking.”

Although the amount of “fake news” appears to be increasing, primarily through social media platforms, at least the public appears to be waking up to the problem. Professor George pointed out that if American policymakers had been less susceptible to “fake news” in 2003, perhaps they would not have accepted the administration’s claim that the Iraqis possessed weapons of mass destruction, and many thousands of lives might have been saved. He predicted that intelligent solutions to the problem of “fake news” will emerge in the next few years.

EastWestCenter.org 1601 East-West Road, Honolulu, HI 96848 USA. Established 1960.
